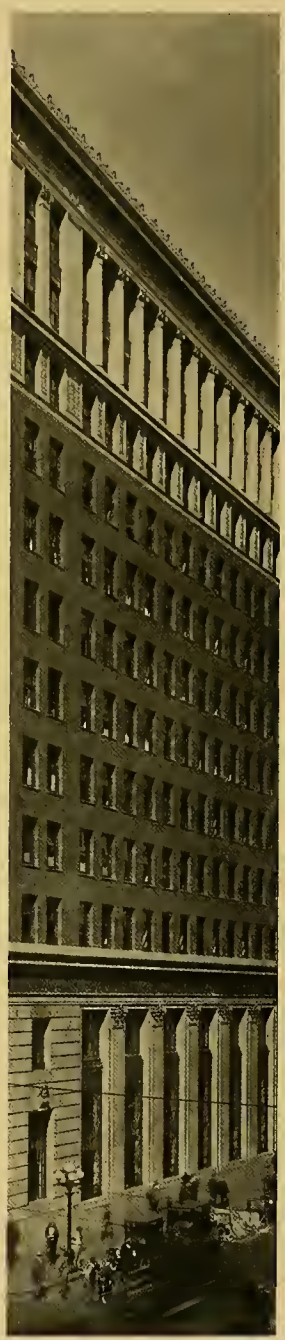
SHAPES OF CLAY



JUNE · 1925

GLADDING, McBEAN & CO.

The Southern California Chapter
of the
American Institute of Architects

desiring to recognize Merit in Design and Execution of work in Architecture and Fine Arts within its territory has caused the various classes of such work executed subsequent to the year Nineteen Hundred and twenty-two to be judged by a competent Jury

the Terra Cotta of the Bank of Italy - Seventh & Olive Streets - Los Angeles

having been selected by the Jury as deserving of Exceptional Merit in the class this Chapter does hereby

Award

the

Certificate of Honor

to

Tropico Potteries

Contractor

In appreciation of the Faithful Execution of work therein

Dated January 31st 1923

Southern California Chapter
American Institute of Architects

Sumner Hunt
Secretary

Chas. F. Plummer
President

SHAPES OF CLAY

VOLUME I NUMBER 2

JUNE · 1925

"It is a Noble Thing to Do this with Moulded Clay"

WHEN the Bank of England was established, in 1694, it found temporary lodgment in the Mercers' Chapel. On September 28, 1694, the Bank moved to Grocers' Hall and remained there as a tenant until 1732. For thirty-eight years the greatest of banks prospered in makeshift headquarters.

In the soul of banking the vital spark is character, and foremost among the virtues that make up banking character are integrity and fidelity. These twain inspire public confidence, without which a bank is naught.

To design and build a great bank calls for the higher architecture of the spirit. The foundations are laid on personality, the structure rises on ideals, it is roofed with the wisdom of experience. Fine bank buildings do not make fine banks. Grocers' Hall did not keep the Bank of England insignificant, nor has Threadneedle Street made it great. Yet who would relegate a great bank to a mean building or to an obscure locality?

For a great banking institution the architect can do a splendid thing, because the architect is an artist, and therefore an interpreter. It is in his power to interpret the bank correctly to the public, to express the character of the bank, to set an idea to beauty.

Exactly that thing has been done for the Bank of Italy, Los Angeles, by Morgan, Walls & Clements. Because these architects have understood, the

building expresses the personality of the bank. They have given it a habitation of nobility, dignity, and beauty.

The Bank of Italy Building at Seventh and Olive streets, in the heart of the Los Angeles financial district, is a combined bank and office structure. It is a Class-A building, with steel frame, and built to limit height.

Los Angeles imposes a height limit of 150 feet on all commercial Class-A buildings, thus making it imperative that the growth of the business district shall be out instead of up. In older cities of settled boundaries and limited business area, the sky-scraper was inevitable, and the down-town streets became dark canyons echoing with the roar of congested traffic. So Los Angeles, a youngster among cities, had many metropolitan examples of what to avoid, and, fortunately, it was not too late to act. The traffic problem already becoming serious, the multiplication of closely set sky-scrapers would have been an unbearable evil. So Los Angeles put a check on soaring buildings, and kept the sunlight on her down-town streets.

Does this limitation work a hardship upon the architect? Certainly it curbs his facility. In other large cities where the sky is the limit, the designer may depend upon mass and proportion and general outline to gain his effects; he realizes that his building will be viewed from distances. In Los Angeles the down-town building is seen only from the narrow street; every view is a close-up. The Los Angeles architect, therefore, must confine embellishment to the street façades alone. For him there is no lofty crown to play with, no delicate maze of spires and cornices, no pinnacles, no richly colored roof to catch and reflect the sun.

And yet, as in every other instance where sound reason places a limitation upon art, there is compensation. This very curb arouses the spirit of the Los Angeles architect and impels him to find another outlet for the beauty that is denied release in the ordinary way. Whatever he possesses of delicacy and grace is concentrated upon the façade. He works out with loving care the profile of the moulding, the proper fenestration, the character of ornament, and all the other details that go to make up his design.

Above and beyond this, shaping his whole attitude toward the problem, is a preoccupation with materials, their texture and color. Accord-

ing to his decision on these paramount issues he either succeeds or fails.

In studying this building for the Bank of Italy the architects gave the place of first esthetic importance to the selection of the right and rightly colored materials with which to clothe the structure. Because of its inherent excellence as a building material, and because it possesses greater possibilities for color treatment than any other lasting material, terra-cotta was eventually selected to face the two lower and the three topmost stories. A mottled terra-cotta with a mat-enamel surface was chosen as being peculiarly appropriate to the character of the building as well as friendly with the play of sunshine. "Pulsichrome," this terra-cotta is called by Gladding, McBean & Co., who manufactured it specially for this building at their Tropico plant, Glendale, Los Angeles County. It strikes the dominant chord of the façades. It has dignity with charm, in the noonday heat it keeps its temper, it is fitting, and it is rich. An outstanding problem of manufacture was to obtain the extra large blocks which were designated for the lower stories free from warping. So successfully was this problem solved by the skilled men of Tropico that a steel straight-edge can be moved evenly across any of these large pieces. Workmanship achieved another fine feat in the huge fluted Corinthian columns of terra-cotta for the Seventh-Street façade. The plastic possibilities of terra-cotta are excellently illustrated in the capitals of these columns—they have their prototype in the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli.

For the intermediate stories, the Los Angeles Pressed Brick Company manufactured a face brick of unusual shade. This effect was obtained by a special burning process with their Oro Grande Gray Ruffle, resulting in a brick of ruffled texture in soft-toned browns and grays. The clay used in the manufacture of this brick is shipped from the Mojave Desert, coming from Oro Grande near Victorville. The brick was laid with a rake joint and yellowish mortar, four courses of stretchers between header courses, and a diaper pattern was formed by the use of selected fire-flashed brick in the header courses only.

A distinctive feature is the metallic frieze which bands the lower stories. Almost black, it helps in the subtle color adjustment of the terra-cotta

I · Bank of Italy Building, Los Angeles — Morgan, Walls & Clements, Architects

In the heart of the Los Angeles financial district, at Seventh and Olive streets, the Bank of Italy has reared a noble structure of terra-cotta and brick wherein architectural beauty serves as a handmaiden to banking strength.

II · Bank of Italy Building, Los Angeles — Morgan, Walls & Clements, Architects

Liaison of color was established between the mottled "Pulsichrome" terra-cotta and the browns and grays of the intermediate brick by means of a dark metallic frieze that bands the façades, a treatment that is novel in effectiveness and technique.

and brick. This frieze was first conceived as cast bronze, applied on plain terra-cotta ashlar; but this conception was abandoned when experiments proved the feasibility of a process never attempted before. The ornament was modeled into the terra-cotta in the regular manner. Before burning, the glaze was omitted from the ornament, the flat background only being glazed. After the terra-cotta had been burned and fitted, it was sent to the Metal Coating Company, where a coating of molten brass was sprayed on the surface. The pores absorbed sufficient brass before cooling to fix a thin metallic coating over the ornament. It was then polished, delivered to the building, and erected; then treated with acid and lacquered into its dark, antique tone of bronze. The design is symbolical of finance and industry, combining the eagle of our American coinage, beehive and sunburst, cornucopia, and shield with lion rampant, reminiscent of Florentine banking.

The upper stories are invested with grace and delicacy by a colonnade which rests on a series of exquisitely ornamented panels inserted between the windows. The building is crowned by a simple cornice topped with a noble *cheneau,* the motif of which is the Greek honeysuckle with flames. All of these are in terra-cotta.

The excellence of the terra-cotta work of the entire structure has been acclaimed in a very special way. "Desiring to recognize merit in design and execution of work in Architecture and Fine Arts," the Southern California Chapter of the American Institute of Architects awarded a certificate of honor to the manufacturers. The certificate is reproduced in this number.

Italian Renaissance precedent was followed in the general scheme of the design, this style lending itself sympathetically to the suggestion of a banking institution that is strong, secure, and worthy of public confidence. In the transition from the majestic dignity of the lower stories to the quiet effectiveness of the levels above, there is a pleasant undertone of utility that blends with the general rhythm of the building's noble beauty.

And it is a noble thing for men to do this with their cut stone or moulded clay, . . . to make the face of a wall look infinite, and its edge against the sky like an horizon: or even if less than this be reached, it is still delightful to mark the play of passing light on its broad surface, and to see by how many artifices and gradations of tinting and shadow, time and storm will set their wild signatures upon it.—RUSKIN.

SHAPES OF CLAY

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Edward F. O'Day, Editor

Vol. I JUNE, 1925 No. 2

"Terra-cotta meets the demand for a structural, esthetic and economical building material of larger unit and more breadth of expression than brick; of more permanence, plasticity and economy than stone; of more lasting quality and strength than wood."

THE manufacture of terra-cotta is a process in which the ceramic chemist joins hands with the skilled mechanic. The clays that may be used to advantage are limited in number, and must be mixed with a judgment that is born only of deep knowledge and long experience. The perfection of surfaces, textures, and glazes in various colors and tones is the result of years of laboratory experiment. A terra-cotta plant is judged, in the final analysis, by the clays and the chemical formulae which it controls.

The first step in the execution of an order for terra-cotta is to redraw the architect's drawings to shrinkage scale.

These shop drawings go to the plaster shop, where plaster of Paris models are made, and then plaster moulds. If ornamental modeling is designated, the plaster model goes to the studio where sculptors apply the ornament in clay, the model then going back to the plaster shop for the making of moulds.

Moulds go to the pressing shop, where they are lined with clay. Then the pieces are put on a drying-board and finished—that is, mould seams are removed, and surface and texture formed. Ornamental pieces are carefully retouched and pointed to the feeling of the original model.

After drying, the pieces go to the sprayers, where surface finish, glaze, slip, or color is applied by an atomizer with compressed air.

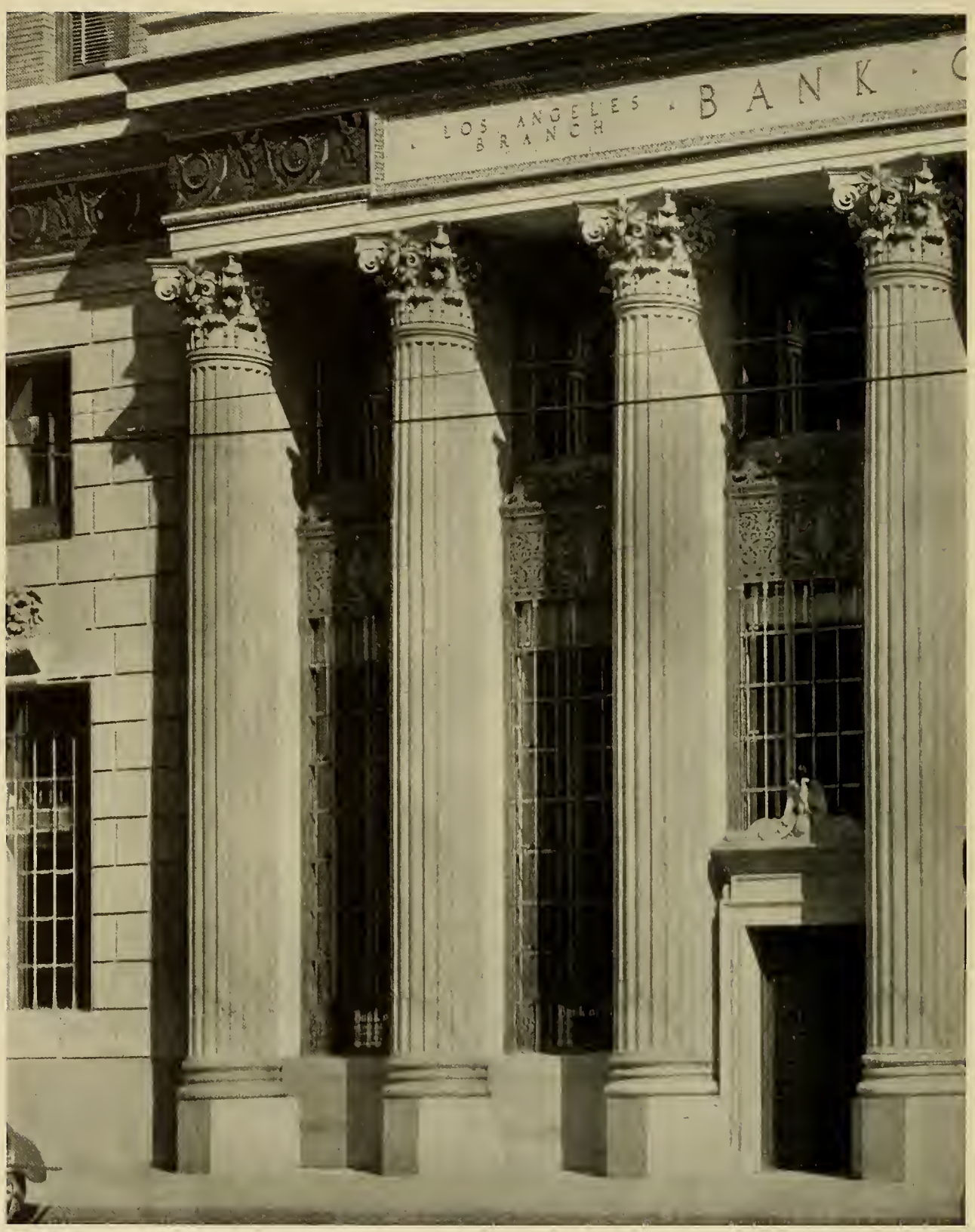
The terra-cotta is now ready for burning in the kiln. Stacked in tiers built up with posts and slabs, the flames attack it indirectly through muffles and double walls, and it is protected from gas or flash. It is baked to a heat of 2200 degrees Fahrenheit under pyrometric control.

Cooling is a slow and careful process. When this is completed the terra-cotta goes to the fitting floor to be assembled, marked, and packed.

* * *

Aside from its esthetic qualities and economical advantages, terra-cotta is indisputably the most durable of building materials. Neither age nor the elements affect its beauty or texture. It is virtually impervious to water. Dust and the stains of weather are easily removed either by washing or dry brushing.

Terra-cotta comes unharmed through conflagrations. In great fires it suffers damage from mechanical cause, not from heat.



III · Bank of Italy Building, Los Angeles — Morgan, Walls & Clements, Architects

Los Angeles architects must build for close-up, not for distant view; hence a preoccupation with material and color. These terra-cotta surfaces are friendly in the noontime sun, and in the shadows of moonlight they take on glamour.

IV · Bank of Italy Building, Los Angeles — Morgan, Walls & Clements, Architects

The three topmost stories, cornice and cheneau, are of terra-cotta, and here, as in the first two stories, the architects concentrated on design, thus finding compensation for the height-restriction imposed in Los Angeles.

V · Bank of Italy Building, Los Angeles — Morgan, Walls & Clements, Architects

A special problem of terra-cotta manufacture was solved in the production of extra large pieces free from warping. A steel straight-edge can be moved evenly across any of these mat-enameled "Pulsichrome" surfaces.

VI · Bank of Italy Building, Los Angeles — Morgan, Walls & Clements, Architects

The dark frieze that bands the lower stories was originally planned as cast bronze. But Gladding, McBean & Co. modeled the ornament on terra-cotta, which was left in the natural biscuit to receive a coating of brass.

VII · Bank of Italy Building, Los Angeles — Morgan, Walls & Clements, Architects

The note of utility is delicately yet clearly sounded throughout the structure; but sheer beauty is dominant in these great Corinthian columns, in which the plasticity of terra-cotta is strikingly shown.

VIII · Bank of Italy Building, Los Angeles, Morgan, Walls & Clements, Architects

Interpreting the character of a great banking institution, the architects conceived the entranceways in terms of majestic calm, and found in terra-cotta a material that would permit these fluted columns to rise with soaring dignity.

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